

Strictly for the Birds

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A series of drabbles and one-shots exploring Satsuki's time in the cage. Thoughts, situations, feelings, all that jazz. Will definitely be artsy and possibly gratuitous. Rating will go up as content does.

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Strictly for the Birds

[Introduction](#)

[Faust](#)

[Time to face the music](#)

[Free](#)

[I'll Hold Your Hand](#)

[Sunglasses](#)

Faust

Hi, guys! I wanted to write one single glorious story on this subject, but my brain had too many ideas, so this is what's going down! Multifarious, pretentious verbiage! Yeah! Anyway, I'm open for requests so if there's something you want to see send me over a peep and I'll do what I can.

Kisses,

~Bad Mitt

She willed herself not to scrape her tongue against the roof of her mouth - if she did, it would mean she was thirsty, and she wasn't. Using only the raw force of her will, Kiryuin Satsuki had convinced herself that she wasn't thirsty.

Nui thought herself funny. Satsuki had ascertained that it was her freaky half-sister's job to feed her today, and the nutritious meal had consisted of a graham cracker and six packets of airline peanuts.

Where did those come from? she thought, absently, forcing herself to look away from the water dripping from the ceiling. There was no reason for anything airline-related to be on the island. She was distracted by a skittering sound, and she pushed her neck forward to look around her arm, wincing at the sharp pain that shot down into her tightly-wound shoulders. A rat peered back at her, whiskers twitching as it sat with its hands resting lightly on the bottom edge of her cage. Satsuki twitched her nose back, her mind free from mental judgments.

He wants the peanuts, she realized. Despite her hunger, her throat, swollen with salt, hadn't been able to swallow the last packet. She had spat them out onto the floor. Satsuki could still hear Nui giggling and see her cold pinky reaching out to lightly boop her nose. At the

time, she had only been grateful that Nui was too short to replicate their mother's viciously invasive mouth-to-mouth feeding, but now, after several hours without water, she was within a hair's breadth of admitting that she would rather drink from her abuser's mouth than go without water.

The rat was closer now, inching in short, zigzagging dashes towards her feet. Satsuki did not move.

Let them eat cake, she thought wryly, closing her eyes briefly in lieu of a smile. She could no longer see the rodent over the ridge of her ribcage, but she could hear it munching under her. Occasionally, a whisker tickled tips of her toes, and she pressed her lips together in her effort to keep from moving.

Perhaps if I leave it food... well, her mental turn of phrase gave her pause. Spitting out chunks of scraps onto the floor could hardly be called "leaving food," but still her stimulus-starved mind spun a tale of slow friendship between two unlikely individuals. She, the prisoner, offering her food to him, the wily rat. The munching stopped and Satsuki felt tiny, cold hands lightly dab at the top of her foot as whiskers explored her ankle. She felt a small spark of warmth towards the animal.

I will call him Faust, she decided. *I hope he comes back tomo* - her thought stopped suddenly as she felt sharp teeth sink into her sensitive instep and pain shot up her leg. Warmth gone instantly, she lashed out and kicked the creature across the cell, the jagged edge of her false toenail tearing open its stomach. For a long while, it lay gasping against one of the bars before going still.

Satsuki bit her lip. She wanted to cry.

Sorry, this one's not that good. It started out as something bigger but got too complicated.

Time to face the music

"Do you hate me?"

No answer. There was a sharp crack of bone against bone followed by a barely audible hiss of pain, more like a sigh than anything.

"Do you think I'm evil?" Ragyo again raised her fist, threatening. "Be a good girl and answer me."

"Yes."

"Hm," She chuckled, fist opening into a hand that leisurely reached out to tease the skin over her daughter's hip. "Do you think I was born evil, the devil incarnate?"

"No." Surprised and amused, Ragyo stilled the motion of her hands and gripped Satsuki around the ribs, thumbs digging up and under the ridge of the bone. Satsuki's stomach heaved as she held in a cough, but her face remained neutral, eyes shut.

"No? So you still have some affection for your dear old mother?"

"No." Satsuki tossed her head up and opened her eyes, her natural charisma pouring through her words like a fierce light streaming from her body. "If you were born evil, then you would not be at fault for the atrocities you have committed. You would not be responsible for your vile nature. You could blame fate or the gods or your bloodline; but no, Ragyo, you have made yourself what you are, you have no one to blame but yourself, and one day you will bear the full brunt of the consequence-" Satsuki was silenced by a punishing blow to her face that cracked her head back and made her ears ring.

Her mother laughed coolly, reaching around to lift Satsuki's head with uncharacteristic gentleness. Softly, she pressed their mouths together, relishing the taste of blood.

"Who taught you to speak that way to your mother?" she murmured, her lips against Satsuki's cheek. Her voice grew deep and husky as she twined her arms around her daughter, a hand sliding down between her legs. "What am I going to do with you?"

Satsuki didn't bother trying to press her legs together. It was time to face the music. With tremendous effort, she flexed her stiff, cold hands before lightly twitching the index finger on her right hand.

C

She heard the note boom out in her mind, the beginning of a sweet, familiar melody. Not allowing the tones in her mind outpace her hands, she stroked another imaginary key.

E

Her other hand slowly eked out the left-hand part of the piece in time to the slow motion of her right.

G

Her hands ached under the pressure of her weight against the shackles, but as her body was set aflame and her breathing grew ragged under her mother's touch, she never ceased to softly play the only piece of music she had ever learned.

She thanked merciful heaven that Nonon had taught it to her.

One year ago.

When they were with the other elites, Jakuzure Nonon was nothing if not dutiful. She saluted, bowed, and spoke with the appropriate honorifics. But when they were alone, the pretence of society was dissolved by old friendship and they would sit together on Nonon's pink couch, each attending to their own activities in companionable silence.

Nonon sat with her head back, face set in quiet awe as she listened to the last notes of the piece played through her headphones fade into exquisite silence. With a sigh, she removed the headset and let it rest around her neck and turned to look at her friend. Satsuki was sitting with her legs crossed on the edge of the couch, brow furrowed as she followed a particularly difficult line in her small book. Still staring at the page, she reached for her notepad and scribbled a hasty set of notes before her face relaxed again.

Nonon looked curiously at the stack of books beside Satsuki. The smallest one on top proclaimed its title to be *The Bones* . Nonon smirked, pleased. Satsuki was always reading books that could only serve to turn the brain into a crazy, scattered mush. Books with titles like *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, or *Meditations on first Philosophy* . Nonon stuck out her tongue. Gross. A book with the title of *The Bones*, however, held promise. Such a title spoke of a mystery novel with light romance and chilling humor. Nonon was always trying to tell her friend that her brain needed to relax sometimes - maybe she had finally taken the hint.

Nonon reached over the pile of stuffed animals on the middle of the couch to snatch the book. Satsuki didn't notice. She was deep in concentration, her lips fiddling absently against the edge of her pencil. Nonon opened the book and thumbed through it, but was immediately and greatly disappointed. There was nothing but short lines of text and small diagrams of geometric propositions. Disgusted, she flipped to the cover and realized with horror that she had just picked up a book summarizing Euclid's *Elements* .

"Satsuki!?" She all but screeched, tossing the book back to the other side of the couch. Startled, Satsuki looked up, pencil dangling from her mouth as her hand instinctively shot out and grabbed the book out of the air to softly lower it back onto its pile. Regaining her composure, she adjusted the reading glasses slipping down her nose and arched an eyebrow at her friend who looked like a sad smear of bubblegum on the oversized couch.

"Yes?"

"There's more to life than math, you know!"

"Of course." Satsuki blinked. "There's also-"

"If you say 'philosophy,' I swear I'll shave your head while you're sleeping."

"Hmm..." Satsuki frowned, though her hand reached up subconsciously to stroke her own hair, as she considered her answer. Sitting up straight, she used the two middle fingers on her right hand to push her glasses up onto the top of her head.

"Mathematics describes the universe, philosophy tells us how to interpret it. What more could anyone ask for?" Nonon groaned loudly and flopped onto the arm of the couch before turning suddenly to take Satsuki by the hand.

"Look, I know you're in love with Carter-"

"Descartes."

"-and get off on staring at locust problems all day,"

"Locus."

"But you've got to start *feeling* things! Really feeling them! You'll go crazy if you stay in your mind twenty-four-seven and never come out long enough to feel your heart beat." Nonon put a hand over her own heart, but immediately blushed at her unusually poetic turn of phrase. She put her hand down and let go of Satsuki's (which had gone cold) and folded her arms over her chest. "You're gonna go crazy..." She muttered, pursing her lips and looking away.

Satsuki's frown deepened as her arm dropped limply back to her side. A violent clenching in her gut and the sudden cold in her limbs told her that allowing herself to feel wouldn't end very prettily. Still, she owed it to Nonon to return her friendship, so she decided to do what she had been doing for years: fake it. It's easy enough to

pretend emotion while still firmly walled up in the castle of the mind. A sigh here, a tear there, all simple enough.

"What should I do, Nonon?" Nonon's eyes went suddenly bright, and she struck her hands together with a resounding clap, her mouth growing wide with a smile.

"Satsuki, what do you think of the piano?"

She had never been in so much pain. She was sure a rib had been broken, for her already labored breathing had turned to a sharp rasp as she struggled to work her lungs against her body. She lamented losing as much weight as she had insofar as it meant that her strength was ebbing away, but at the same time she wished she could lose much more so to ease the necessary struggling of her diaphragm.

She was alone again, and cold. The dusk had robbed her of the sunbeam that shone in on her in the early afternoons. Absent to the point of insanity, she wondered if she had tan lines in the shape of bars on her left side.

Heh... I could never go to the beach again.

The screech of her nails on the floor accosted her ears, but she didn't stop. She would never stop. She tried to tell herself that she needed to escape to save the world, to save her friends, but that need had descended into pure animal passion. She needed to breathe, she needed to eat, she needed to sleep.

Oh, God, sleep.

Her days of philosophizing seemed infinitely far away. Thinking seemed like a thing of the past. She needed something to ground her, something to keep her attached to the earth, to reality. With slow diligence, she moved her fingers again, occasionally brushing against the taut chain as she hummed almost inaudibly along to the

music in her head. She felt immediately soothed, and she realized with sudden and fierce warmth that Nonon had been right all along.

She needed more music in her life.

Nonon handed her a sheet covered in notes.

"What is this?"

"It's Mozart's piano sonata K. 545." Nonon set her arms akimbo. "It was written specifically for people new to music, so you should be all right."

Satsuki felt dizzy looking at the notes crowded on the sheet. She wanted to whimper, but Kiryuin Satsuki does not whimper, so, instead, she slowly passed the papers back to Nonon.

"Play it for me, please."

Pleased, Nonon settled herself on the piano's bench and began the short sonata. Satsuki listened carefully. It was simple and repetitive, but stirring all the same, the notes sounding like a delicious ripple of fresh water. Nonon closed her eyes as she played, but kept her motions jaunty. When she was finished, she turned to her friend, grinning smugly.

"What did you think?"

"Beautiful."

"Beautiful."

Satsuki didn't hear her. She was playing the music louder, faster, skipping no measures or repeats, over and over, trying to drown out the sound of her own screaming, trying to force herself into that

transcendental plane of the music-lover where nothing else exists but the trilling of the notes and the steady dripping of the chords.

"Your friends truly have your best interests in mind. It was so sweet of Ira to leave this here for me."

Satsuki opened one eye and forced herself to unclench the muscles in her stomach that were holding her knees to her chest. She let her legs drop, both proud and exhausted.

"Gamagoori is nothing if not noble," and she meant it, though she did wish that she had not allowed his seemingly harmless kinks go unchecked, or at least that she had required him to lock up his disciplinary paraphernalia instead leaving it all over the goddamn school where just anyone could pick it up.

She tried not to hate him as his custom-made lash flicked over her hips, leaving a line of raging fire under her navel. Her legs jerked, but she forced them to stay down just as she forced her irrational hatred to stay down. She knew Gamagoori would be devastated if he saw what was happening. He would definitely cry big, fat tears and probably try to kill himself. He would literally kiss her feet and grovel for forgiveness without really believing she would give it to him. "He is a greater soul than you have ever been." She hissed through clenched teeth, her own face soaked in tears, her bitten lips bloodying her mouth.

"Is that so? Well, your *shield* is doing an excellent job, I must say."

Satsuki removed herself again, beginning the first minor chords with a loud mental bang to drown out the sharp crack of leather against her skin, receding into the music that she had never stopped playing. All her elites, no, her *friends*, had always been there for her. To let her thoughts of them be poisoned would be to betray them, to defile them undeservedly.

Never .

Finally, her fingers, so agile at the sword but hopelessly clumsy at the ivory, had been able to peck out the notes of Mozart's sonata. She would sit, frustrated as she hit sour notes while Nonon leaned happily against the piano and rambled about chord progression and superkeys. Nonon had refused to let her actively participate in the mathematical (more interesting, she thought) aspect of music.

"Don't think the music, Satsuki. Feel it."

And slowly, begrudgingly, she did. She would play the same piece over and over again, this time slowly, then quickly. She would play until emotion rose in her chest and threatened to choke her, and then she would quickly bang the cover shut, taking several minutes to force the feelings down and to the side. Nonon would look concerned, then, but didn't say anything.

They held a little concert before the summer. A small meeting that mimicked the gathering of teens in high school normalcy. Soroi made them all tea and her friends listened to her play the simple piece. They all clapped politely, demure, but the pleasure on their faces was obvious. She was sure she saw Gamagoori wipe away a tear.

The actual music lasted only a few minutes, but pervaded the atmosphere with an unparalleled amicability that lasted well into the afternoon as Satsuki briefly allowed her friends to act as her equals.

The memory of that pleasant day got her through the summer.

And they were still with her, protecting her. Saving her from herself, from the lunacy of her own mind, the mind that she thought would protect her. She had thought that steel castles built with pure thought would save her, keep her safe.

But she had never been more wrong.

She was saved by music. She was saved by her friends.

I've always thought of Satsuki as a huge natural philosophy geek.
shrugs hm...

Free

I'm glad. I'm glad. I've never been better. And, in a sense, it's true. Though I am in a cage, I've never been more free.

Abuse.

I've always hated that word. Abuse implies subjugation. Ownership. You can only abuse the things that belong to you. When a psychopath picks a girl off the street and kills her, it's not abuse. It's murder. He does not own her, and he never will.

I hate that word because it makes you seem better than you are. You're not a sadist, a rapist, a self-proclaimed executioner of perverted justice. No. You're just some fool who doesn't know how to care for her property.

I hate it mostly, however, because it's true. I did belong to you. I was your toy and you took every advantage of me. I let you do what you wanted and never said a word. What does it matter that I was harboring rebellious designs? For all intents and purposes I was no better than Nui - a puppet allowed to indulge its whims.

But I have declared myself free, and so I am. This freedom has come with a nearly unbearable cost, but it is one I am quite willing to pay. I'm not a toy anymore. I'm a prisoner of war.

The door is opening. She's coming in. I close my eyes. What do I care?

She can't physically abuse me anymore. All she can do is beat me. When she touches me, it won't be abuse, it'll be rape.

I curl my lip into a sneer that I've never before dared to show. It would be more wise to show nothing, for nothing excites the perverted psychopath I call my mother more than a good show, but I

am drunk on my freedom. I have dared to stand up, to draw my sword against her. I do not belong to her anymore.

I am my own.

Ah, my first drabble. It was supposed to be longer... my brain is... tired.

For those of you interested, by the way, I'm about a third of the way through the next chapter of *Fashionista*, so it should be up in the next week or so. In the meantime, have this thing I made!

I'll Hold Your Hand

720 hours. One month, 24 hours a day equals 6 months, four hours a day. Too. Damn. Long.

Nonon sighed as she slammed the door to her apartment shut. She huffed again, raking a hand through her hair and sending her beanie flying as she squiggled out of her shoes by dragging her feet on the floor. She flopped onto the couch and curled up on it, looking like a smear of bubblegum against the beige furniture as she stared at the turned-off television.

I can't watch anymore. Not today. Tomorrow. Nonon rolled over, grabbing the afghan she kept on the back of the couch and rolling into it. She tried to nap, but the thought that had been nagging at her for months kept on burning, searing a streak of inescapable wakefulness through her skull.

I wasn't there for her.

She groaned, annoyed by the sound of her own voice and sat up, reaching for the remote and turning on the television before pressing play. She turned the volume nearly all the way down and pulled the afghan over her head, pulling her knees up to her chest and tucking her hands under her chin.

She had made Inumuta get the footage for her. She hadn't allowed any questions, and he had readily complied (understandable, given he had been in real danger of losing his jewels.) She hated him for giving her that concerned look, that pitying quirk of the stupid blue eyebrows. As if he understood, as if any of them could ever understand. They didn't know her like she did.

Four hours, every day. Every goddamn day.

Nonon was well into her fourth month. Watching, always watching.

Two left.

It was dark on the screen, almost completely black, and yet Nonon did not allow herself fast-forward. She wanted to live, in real time, the imprisonment. It was punishment for being that despicable fair-weather friend, that cretin who slinks away at the first sign of possible pain.

" *Of course I want to find her!*" she had called to Sanageyama as they had struggled through the wreckage of their academy, coughing out lungfuls of dust and tripping over debris. "*But Satsuki told us that if anything went wrong, we were to focus on evacuating the students! Come on! You can't even follow orders now, Monkey?!*" He assented, finally, but not before giving her a long, hard stare and shoving the fragments of Bakuzan into her hands, huffing as he ran to complete his duties.

It was true. Those were her orders; but she knew, deep down, that she had been relieved, glad, even. Glad that she didn't have to follow her friend into the darkness. Nonon grimaced and ground the heels of her hands into her sandy eyes, struggling to keep watching.

I should have gone after her anyway.

Though the world inside screen was still dark, slices of moonlight slid in through the high window and cut neat lines over the body inside the cage, punctuated by deep shadows thrown by the iron bars.

It was well into the night, but her head was still nodding, unable to rest. Nonon had seen it many times before - she would prop her head against her arm to sleep, but without fail it would fall and jerk her awake.

I should have been there .

She should have been there to hold her head for her, to let her get the rest she needed. She should have been there to wrap her arms around her, to keep her warm. She should have been there to rub

the knots from her shoulders, to find her something to stand on, to comb the crusted blood from her hair, to just hold her and tell her that she wasn't alone. She should have been there.

I'll hold your hand forever and ever.

Liar!

These thoughts spun around and around in Nonon's head in a relentless, merciless circle, tormenting her in mocking, accusing tones. Slowly, her vision blurred as her breath began to come in sobs and tears pooled in her eyes. Angrily, she tore her shoulder over her face, dashing the wet drops away. Unable to contain her emotion, she jammed these thoughts deep down, shoving at them with mindless fury until they settled into a coiled spot of heat under her heart, subdued. Taking a deep, aching breath, Nonon forced her mind to blank, sitting in an absurd daze until the dark screen began to grow light with the approaching dawn.

Though the volume was low, Nonon still jumped at the sound of the door opening. The bubble of stress rose again and began to crash over her as she forced herself to watch the white, lambent figure looming into view. Shaking, she grabbed a throw pillow and shoved the corner into her mouth, biting down on it hard.

No, no, no, not again. It was like she was there. She wasn't in her apartment, safe on her couch; she was in that dripping dungeon, frozen with horror and unable to move.

A heavy pounding on her door snapped her back to the present and sent her heart jerking into her throat. Swallowing, she turned her head to stare at the door, completely disinclined to move.

"Oi, Troll!" Ryuko called through the wood. "Open up! You forgot about lunch with us, stupid! God, don't you ever check your phone? I brought you a doggy-bag with all the stuff Sats told me you would hate!" Nonon heard Ryuko chuckle to herself and she rolled her eyes. "Hello!? Hellooooo!?" Nonon rolled over to lie on her side, still

clutching the pillow to her chest and returned her eyes with a painful jolt to the screen.

I don't have time for this. Go away! I'm not home!

She fully intended to keep quiet and wait for Ryuko to go away, but to her sickening horror the knob turned and her best friend's sister came crashing through the door.

I forgot to lock the door!?

Shit. Shit. Shit!

Frantic, she scrambled for the television's remote control and just managed to clumsily slam the 'off' button before Ryuko could see what was on the screen. Her suspicious actions, however, did not go unnoticed.

"Ooh, Jakuzure, watcha watching?" she said, pouncing on the opportunity to torment the former non-athletic chair as she threw herself over the back of the couch and tossed the bag of food into Nonon's lap. "You got some creepy porno on? Look at you! Your face is the same color as your hair!" Ryuko cackled, misreading Nonon's expression of frenetic shame, and grabbed for the remote. "Lemme see!"

"Cut it out, ass-face." Nonon growled, but her deadly-serious meaning was lost in the squeaky register of her voice. Still grinning wolfishly, Ryuko caught hold of the remote and yanked it from the other girl's grip.

"Did you finally find a video from Satsuki's time as a porn-star? Ha, as if!" Ryuko laughed brightly, unaware of how close to the truth her fanciful ramblings were. "You would totally love that, wouldn't you, troll?" Now truly panicking, Nonon sprang at Ryuko, grabbing a fistful of her hair and screaming unintelligibly, mouth cracked open, eyes wide and bloodshot. A little frightened, Ryuko tore herself away and stumbled off the couch, her thumb pinching instinctively at the plastic

casing in her hand. The screen flashed to life, static crackling over its surface.

No, no, no, no. This isn't happening!

Slowly, Ryuko turned to look and the remote dropped to the floor as her hands fell limply to her sides. Nonon's mouth went dry, but she was suddenly filled with a sick, deathly calm. With one eye she instinctively watched the screen, while with the other she glared balefully at Ryuko. She didn't know what to say. There was nothing to say. The silence was broken only by the sounds twisting out of the tinny speakers - the deep murmuring of a satisfied gloat; a few small, pained gasps; the creaking of chains and the screech of metal.

"When... did this happen?" Ryuko finally managed to croak, all mischief and good intentions obliterated. She didn't move to look at Nonon, but her limp hands began to close and shake, the knuckles going white. Jakuzure's head whipped around to fix Ryuko with a hideous sneer.

"When you were lying on your ass, sleeping away your first-world problems." Nonon, tucked her hands under her chin and mocked the girl beside her, her face still twisting in rage and disgust. "'Look at me, I'm Ryuko, and my life is so hard just sleeping in bed while Satsuki is... is -'" She choked on the latter end of the sentence, the hate dissolving suddenly from her expression, leaving her looking small and lost.

Ryuko, meanwhile, lashed around to stare at Nonon, her mouth slowly opening into a snarl. As soon as the expression began, however, it was wiped away by confusion and doubt.

"Wha... she... she wasn't with you? I thought-"

"You thought wrong, you fucking cunt!" Nonon stood and jabbed her finger into Ryuko's chest. "We were all wrong. This never should have happened! So just get the hell out and leave me along!" Ryuko's face suddenly hardened and she stepped forward to make

use of her height advantage, towering over the smaller girl. With one hand she grabbed Nonon by the front of the shirt, with the other she pointed to the television.

"Turn it off."

"No." Nonon crossed her arms, meeting Ryuko's eyes impetuously. She had come this far, she wasn't going to stop now.

"I said *turn it off!* "

"And I. Said. No!" Growling, Ryuko shoved Nonon back onto the couch and picked up the remote, hurling it at the television shattering the screen and making it fall off the wall with a crash onto the floor. Crying out, Nonon jumped up, but Ryuko had her by the throat and pushed her against the wall, her face seething with confusion and rage.

"What the fuck are you doing watching this shit!? Where the fuck do you get off!? Does it turn you on, you little shit?"

"Shut up!" The tears were coming back and Nonon wasn't sure she could stop them.

"You shut up!" Ryuko shook her, screaming into her face. "That's my sister! That's my fucking sister! I thought you were friends! What the fuck is wrong with you!? I just saw her today! We had lunch!" Her breath was coming in hot, angry breaths, panting onto Nonon's face. "She said, 'I wish Nonon were here.' You know what she didn't say? She didn't say, 'I wish my best friend would watch me come on my mother's fucking face!'"

Jakuzure slapped her, then. She slapped her so hard that her head cracked to the side and blood flew from her nose as her rear end slammed into the floor. Exhausted, Nonon slumped onto the couch again, choking out rough sobs as tears flowed unchecked down her cheeks.

"I should have been there, okay? She needed me and I wasn't there." Ryuko just stared at her, her breath grating over her throat in a rough gasp. Even so, her eyes softened suddenly and she sighed, righting the upturned coffee table so she could use it to lever herself onto the other side of the couch. She didn't say anything, but continued to stare pointedly at Nonon. The pink-haired girl wanted to hiss at her, but any hostility she had left was lost in her desperate, unstoppable sobbing. Flushing, she covered her face, but all the emotion she had been stuffing deep under her heart was coming out and there was nothing she could do to control it.

I should have...

I should have been there.

I'll hold your hand.

I can't, I can't, I can't.

Why didn't I -

Suddenly calm, Ryuko scootched into the middle of the couch and tentatively placed a hand on Nonon's shoulders, sighing.

"She started a garden, you know," she started, looking away from Nonon and towards the door. "She doesn't tan so her nose is all pink even though she uses, like, SPF a hundred. She met me for lunch in a posh little cafe but there was dirt under her fingernails and I swear the waiter was so disgusted!" Ryuko chuckled to herself. "We waited for you for a long time. Sats looked so sad when you didn't show. I think she really misses you." Nonon's sobs were subsiding and she looked up at Ryuko, roughly raking her forearm over her eyes.

"She's not trapped anymore, troll." Ryuko said softly, finally turning to look at her. "She's not suffering in some dungeon but she still needs you. That person? That person you've been watching on that screen for who-knows-how-long? She doesn't need you. Satsuki needs you,

and she needs you to be out there with her. So just get it into your dumb head, okay?

"But..." her head was reeling. It felt like it had been opened, somehow, but it was about to close again. "I promised..."

"If you really think she wanted you there, then you're an idiot." A trace of Ryuko's former anger flared to life, making her read streak quiver and glow. "Do you think Ragyo would have just let you stay in there with her to give her snuggles? She would have used you to torture her, you stupid bitch! Satsuki would've broken, and it would've your fault. Is that what you want? Is that *really* what you want?" Nonon opened her mouth, but Ryuko stood suddenly, shaking her head. "No. I'm done. I am so done with you. I won't tell Satsuki, but you'd better get your shit together or I'll come after you."

Shoving her hands into her pockets, Ryuko strode to the door, giving Nonon one last hard stare before slamming the door behind her. She stomped so loudly that Jakuzure could hear her all the way down the stairs.

For a long while she just sat there, staring blankly at the wall. Her tears were gone, her face was dry, and she had nothing left. She was empty. Sighing so deeply it felt like she was expelling her very soul, Nonon stood and walked slowly to her bedroom. As she passed the kitchen, she noticed the empty chalkboard hanging on the wall. Considering it blearily, she suddenly shook herself and scribbled a quick note before drifting quietly to bed:

Call Satsuki.

Sunglasses

"For with my own eyes I saw the Sibyl of Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys cried to her, 'Sibyl, what do you want?' she answered, 'I want to die.'" -Petronicus, *Satyricon*

She stood, as always, demure in the corner. Well, insofar as one can say "corner" in a round room. The air was sticky and hot, rank with the smell of vomit and cheap alcohol, and it was all she could do to not cover her face with her hand. Instead, Hououmaru clutched her clipboard to her chest, hiding behind her sunglasses, feeling nothing but the wasteland in her chest.

She had only been heavily intoxicated once before, when low tolerance had crashed together with mixed liquors and had made a horrible baby together. She had no memory of that night except for kneeling over the toilet and the overwhelming shame she felt when she woke up, covered in dirt and cold sweat. Even the smell of hard alcohol made her stomach roll, and it was all she could do not to gag as she stood, stony-faced, watching.

Hououmaru watched, view obstructed by the bars, as Satsuki tried to spit out the foul liquid as it came pouring into her mouth. She would never forget the horrible choking sound she made as Nui forcefully jammed the funnel further down into the back of her throat, grinning and glassy-eyed, as she sloshed the remainder of a bottle of Smirnoff vodka into the opening. Rei could almost feel the burning liquid in her own throat and involuntarily gritted her teeth together, accidentally making a loud cracking noise.

A single glance from Lady Ragyo was enough to quell the raging sea in her stomach. She adjusted her grip on her clipboard and set her mouth into a hard line. Empathetic is not an acceptable way to feel towards traitors. Struggling with her will, Rei forced her face into a sneer as she gazed upon Satsuki. She wasn't a sad prisoner of war,

just some poor, very drunk eighteen-year-old; she was a filthy murderous turncoat who deserved everything coming to her. Hououmaru swallowed and looked away.

Sidelong, she watched Ragyo push back her daughter's head and steal a forceful kiss. A sudden spray of carmine blood splattered the white feathers adorning the CEO's dress, and Ragyo jerked back, hand flying to her torn tongue. Satsuki's head lolled back, too heavy for her to hold, her teeth stained with her mother's blood. Through ragged gasps, she managed a small smirk. Liquid rage exploded in Hououmaru's body, and she clutched the papers in her hand so hard she almost tore them. How dare she. How *dare* she!?

Hououmaru knew Ragyo wasn't hitting her daughter as hard as she could - if she was, all her bones would be utterly shattered, her body a mess of liquefied pulp, such was the exquisite power of her lady - but still the blows sounded heavy, deep, driving straight through sinews and into bones. Still, Rei didn't flinch. This was justice. A small smile lifted the corners of her mouth.

Her lady's hand came crashing down onto Satsuki's hip, leaving a swiftly purpling handprint. The girl didn't even flinch - her head hung limply from her shoulders and her breathing was shallow. Nui picked up a bottle of some shitty brand of whiskey and started to open it, but her mother stopped her with a smug smile and an outstretched hand.

"Ah, Satsuki, you know this hurts me more than it hurts you." She said some other things - wry, sadistic things that could've been funny in another context- but Rei wasn't listening. Nui was laughing, but it sounded like a buzzing bee as her vision swam. Hououmaru leaned minutely against the wall behind her, smearing her pristine white suit with filth. In a moment Ragyo was in front of her, leaning down to gaze in amused suspicion at her discomposure. Nui loudly clanged the door to the cage behind her, still chortling, and Rei could have sworn she saw Satsuki's knee jerk.

"Hououmaru." For a single instant Rei thought she was going to kiss her, slap her, break her neck, but just as quickly the expression

faded and Ragyo turned her back, shifting her head so that a blinding streak of yellow light fell across her shaded eyes. "Get her something hot to eat." And she was gone, taking Nui with her, leaving Hououmaru practically alone in the dripping room. She was struck with the overwhelming feeling that this was her own prison, and she dropped her documents to clatter against the floor.

Mechanically, she bent to pick up the hose screwed firmly into the spigot in the wall. The metal was shiny, new, a contrast to the well-used granary walls, and absently she brushed her fingers over the cool handle before turning it fully to the left. The green hose jerked in her hands as she washed the floor clean of the vile puddles of stomach acid and alcohol, directing the refuse towards the grate in the back of the room. Mind lost, she quickly hosed Satsuki down as well, centering the stream of water on the base of her collar as a small part of her expected the splotchy blue bruises to be washed away. Sighing, Hououmaru dropped the hose, letting the metal ring on its opening skitter across the uneven concrete before it bumped against the wall, shuddering against the water pressure. For some reason she found the image appropriate, and for a long while she stared, entranced.

The silence startled her, and Rei jerked upright, pausing to twist the spigot closed. For a long while she didn't know what had caught her attention, and her stomach suddenly dropped as she realized that Satsuki wasn't breathing. Filled with alarm, her heart pounding furiously, she dashed into the cage and yanked frantically on the circular lever attached to the winch on the ceiling. Carefully, she lowered the girl a few inches, allowing her to put her feet on the floor. Satsuki's knees trembled but failed to hold, and Hououmaru didn't hesitate. Wrapping her arms around Satsuki's slick, damp body, she pulled her up, easing the pressure on her overtaxed shoulders. Slowly, grating, she began to breathe again, and Rei sighed in relief, pushing her face into space between Satsuki's shoulder blades.

Hououmaru knew she wasn't being merciful. The merciful thing would have been to let her die. In this state, full to the brim with

horrible vodka, she probably wouldn't even have realized she was dying. Furrowing her eyebrows, Rei dug her nails into Satsuki's sides and slowly put her down, making sure her legs held before stepping back. Sucking her teeth, she appraised Satsuki.

An easy death is more than you deserve.

She turned to go, forcefully jerking her shoulder to close the cage door, her mind itself a steel trap. Still, a thought, a memory, niggled at the back of her mind. She had held Satsuki to her chest before, more than once.

"Please! A book!"

No.

Shaking her head, Hououmaru made her steps brisk, scooping up her clipboard and putting her back to the horrible room behind and breathing in the light and sunshine.

The kitchen was too large and too empty, made to be bustling with student cooks prepping for cafeteria lunch. Hououmaru lit a burner and set a huge skillet over the gas flame, the ring of iron on iron ringing through the empty facility and echoing off the hanging pots. Her hand hovered for a moment over the pan, holding a single egg. A sudden, unbidden streak of empathy burned at her stomach at the thought of eating eggs after drinking, and Rei nearly lost her stomach. Slowly, ultimately failing to banish the feeling, she set the egg on the counter, turning instead to snatch a package of rolled oats off the shelf.

As the oatmeal cooked, Hououmaru slid her glasses off of her nose and settled them on the top of her head, mouth dry and chest tight. Still feeling dazed, she shook her head, grabbing an unnecessarily large spoon to stir the bland mixture in the pan. She hated herself for feeling bad, sorry, but the cause of this feeling was one she could

never admit of, so she was left only with an ambiguous sense of self-loathing that curdled deep in the pit of her stomach.

"How about this one?"

Hououmaru squeezed her eyes shut. A single second was all it took. She didn't remember images, exactly, but was rather struck with a sudden warmth that mixed with the cold hardness she expected to feel to create a jerky up-and down of physical reaction.

She sighed and put her hands on her knees, appraising the three-year-old who stared back at her. Eyebrows having already mastered the art of quirking, the girl held out a book to her that was much too large.

"Book, Rei!" She insisted, tiny arms quivering. Chuckling and snorting at once and together, Hououmaru took the fat book from Satsuki, ruffling her soft hair with one hand. Disapproving, she glared at the item in her hand, shaking her head. She knew that Master Soichiro was a scientist, but did he really need to subject his toddler to books with titles like Introduction to Robotics? Eyes taking a quick sweep of the room, she glanced with disdain at the poor excuse for children's books lying scattered about in the girl's room. Huffing, she kicked a book on integral calculus under the bed.

"Come on," she said, putting her hands under Satsuki's arms and picking her up. Cooing, the girl clung to her, snuggling her face into the lapel of her suit. "Let's get you some real books."

She took her to the library and let her pick out a few books in the kids' section. For a while, Satsuki was confused, looking uncertainly at the small, colorful pages in her hands. Sighing, Hououmaru picked her up again, settling into one of the oversized, primary-colored beanbag chairs on the floor. Placing the girl on her lap, she wrapped her arms around her waist, letting her hold the book herself as she read. Hououmaru couldn't help but smile as she felt Satsuki squirm with delight as she turned the pages and tried to read the words

using her inadequate grasp of the alphabet. A warm swelling filled her chest and she held the small girl tighter against herself.

After that, Hououmaru took her to the library any chance she could, making sure to tiptoe around the issue when with Satsuki's parents. There was something about making that small thing so unreasonably happy that brought a smile to her face and warmth to her chest every time.

One afternoon a few years after their first trip to the library, she slipped into Satsuki's room with a new book about a talking pig that she had found sandwiched disproportionately between Jung and Heidegger in the Kiryuin family library. Grinning as she turned it over in her hands, it took her a few moments to notice the sudden, chilling change in the atmosphere.

Satsuki sat in her chair, feet dangling above the floor but back ramrod straight, clutching a massive sword in her tiny hands. Once-sparkling eyes were dull and impassive, glaring critically at Hououmaru.

"I'm sorry, Hououmaru, I didn't hear your knock."

She hadn't knocked. A sudden blush ripped through her, and Rei fumbled to put her sunglasses on, feeling suddenly blinded.

"I-I found this book..." she stuttered, not sure what had changed. "We can read it-" Satsuki silenced her with a raised hand.

"I'm afraid I can read by myself now. I won't be needing your help anymore, thank you."

Her mouth hung open, hurt and surprise written all over her face. Without another word, she turned and left, closing the door behind her. As she went to attend to her duties, she dropped the silly book into the nearest trashcan she could find.

See? Hououmaru told herself as she carried the bowl of hot, sticky oatmeal back down the halls. *She's always been a horrible little thing.* Still, she had to pause and steel herself before entering the dank prison again, trying to convince herself it was because of the dark and cold that she didn't want to go inside. For some unfathomable reason, she didn't remember actually opening the door. The next thing she knew, she was in that tiny cage, bowl clutched between her hands and jaw tight.

Hououmaru didn't immediately try to start forcing food into Satsuki's mouth. Instead, she stared for a long time, raking her eyes up and down the pale length of her body. She expected to feel something. Quietly, she waited for that look she often saw come over Lady Ragyo's face to creep over her own features, but it never happened. She felt nothing, and the rapid beating of her heart felt suddenly painful.

Suddenly filled with rage, she set the bowl on the square horizontal edge of one of the bars and firmly placed a hand over the blue handprint on Satsuki's hip, sliding the other between her legs. Hououmaru stopped suddenly, unsure of what she was doing or what she wanted. Defiantly, she stared at Satsuki's face, watching her eyes bounce and scroll beneath their lids as she struggled to open them.

Carefully, she moved her fingers over Satsuki, slipping them between her soft folds, waiting to feel that intense pleasure of power that her mistress so obviously felt. Hououmaru observed attentively as Satsuki's lower belly clenched suddenly and a Frankenstein flutter jolted to life beneath the hand on her hip, but still she felt nothing but emptiness. Tears sprung suddenly to her eyes, and Rei let her hands drop, breathing choked and unsteady.

It didn't feel good. *She didn't feel good.* Touching Satsuki felt supremely unfair, like kissing a girl you'd roofied, except worse. She hated this, hating feeling guilty when she knew she shouldn't be. Angrily, Hououmaru yanked the winch on Satsuki's chain, pulling her

off her feet again to swing helplessly in the air. Rei grit her teeth at the low groan Satsuki let out, hating her for making her feel so *bad* .

"Shut up!" she shouted, hysteria rising in the back of her throat, as her hand lashed out to beat against Satsuki's swollen, purpled ribs. To her horror, that just made her feel worse, so she turned around on her heel and clawed at her face. Her sunglasses flew from her face and skittered out of the cage onto the concrete outside.

Overwhelmed, Hououmaru struck the oatmeal from its perch, letting it fall in a quivering mess to the ground. Unable to bear it any longer, she rushed out, slamming the door so hard the whole room trembled.

She forgot to bring her glasses with her.

I decided I could only forgive Hououmaru if she felt at least subconsciously bad about what Ragyo did to Satsuki.